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FM AMEMBASSY TASHKENT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8844  
INFO RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT 3492  
RUEHTA/AMEMBASSY ASTANA 9705  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1064  
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK 4108  
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0101  
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 3971  
RUEHHE/AMEMBASSY HELSINKI 0306  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 3737  
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2004  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0914  
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 7218  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0684  
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM 0175  
RUEHTL/AMEMBASSY TALLINN 0384  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2153  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0859  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 002049

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SUBJECT: FOREIGN LABELS BOYCOTTING UZBEK COTTON

REF: TASHKENT 1734

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY ECON OFF B. OLSEN FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: International concern over Uzbekistan's use of child labor to pick cotton is not new. However, the October airing of BBC's "Newsnight" investigative program on the issue re-ignited interest that is quickly gaining international momentum. Fueled by the program and internet sites critical of Uzbekistan, an international call to boycott Uzbek cotton is emerging. End summary.

¶2. (C) In Britain, some of the largest retailers/brands, such as Topshop, Burton and Wallis, are under public pressure to cease purchasing garments made with Uzbek cotton. (Note: The majority of raw Uzbek cotton this year has already been sold to foreign buyers, 70 percent of which are Asian. Cotton exports account for 16 percent of Uzbek GDP. Reftel explains the process in more detail. End note.) British-owned Continental Clothing started an awareness-campaign against Uzbek cotton on its website. The British Ambassador told the Charge on November 28 that the issue is becoming more salient in the UK, adding that several large British department stores, including Marks and Spencer and NEXT, have reportedly informed their purchasers not to purchase garments made with Uzbek cotton. The British Ambassador added that Bangladesh, a major buyer of Uzbek cotton, exports garments to the UK made with Uzbek cotton, demonstrating that this issue is global, i.e. boycotting Uzbek cotton could affect many countries other than Uzbekistan.

¶3. (U) Nordic clothing labels are joining the bandwagon as well. Marimekko, a Finnish textile and clothing chain, stopped buying cotton goods from one of Estonia's largest textile firms, Kreenholm. In response, Kreenholm suspended the use of Uzbek cotton until it is clear that child labor is

not used in Uzbek fields. The Swedish media has publicized the issue and H&M, a Swedish international clothing chain, is under increasing pressure to follow Marimekko.

¶4. (SBU) Responding to the BBC program, in early November the Uzbek Embassy in London issued a public statement that the "issue of so-called forced child labor in cotton fields in Uzbekistan...mismatches with reality." Additionally, it says agricultural enterprises are no longer controlled by the state. On Nov. 29 the Uzbek Embassy in Latvia (the only one in the Nordic-Baltic region) issued a similar statement in reaction to Marimekko and H&M's move: "The mounting media campaign against Uzbekistan...is completely wrong...This is an attempt at unscrupulous competition and political and economic pressure...There are no state farms in Uzbekistan, which rules out the possibility of compulsive farming."

¶5. (SBU) Comment: The Uzbek Government thus has not denied the use of child labor, just the use of forced child labor. The issues are (a) the extent to which child labor still is used and (b) the role the Uzbek authorities play in encouraging or discouraging child labor. (See septel for the International Labor Organization's representative's assessment of the situation.)  
HANSON